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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 000622

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SUBJECT: ITALIANS "ASTONISHED" BY PROPOSED BELGIAN TRIP TO
BELARUS

REF: STATE 30975

Classified By: Classified by Jonathan Cohen, Acting Political Minister
Counselor, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Italian MFA expressed astonishment at the proposed visit by Belgian FM De Gucht to Belarus to observe the election monitoring process. The GOI shares USG concern about the signal the trip could send regarding ODIHR's integrity. While the GOI has no plans to publicly or formally ask De Gucht to cancel his trip, the Italian Embassy in Brussels and the head of the Italian mission to the OSCE will raise their concerns with their Belgian counterparts. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On February 28, poloff discussed reftel with Dr. Susanna Schlein of the OSCE office of the Italian MFA. Schlein stated that neither the Italian Embassy in Brussels nor the Italian OSCE mission in Brussels had prior knowledge of De Gucht's plans to visit Belarus. The GOI was "astonished" by the announcement and noted that other EU members were equally surprised. The MFA shared USG concerns that a self-selected delegation of politicians could cast doubt on ODIHR's election monitoring. The MFA also recognized that this visit will likely be used by Belarus, Russia and others to question the integrity of ODIHR's report on the elections.

¶3. (C) Schlein said the MFA did not consider it likely that De Gucht would cancel his visit, and therefore, would not ask. The MFA, however, would informally raise their concerns through the Italian embassy in Brussels and the Italian OSCE mission in Vienna to encourage De Gucht to avoid giving the impression that the purpose of the trip was to monitor ODIHR's processes.

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